



foodism

TORONTO, ONE BITE AT A TIME

A woman with short dark hair and glasses, wearing a dark blue plaid shirt over a black turtleneck, brown cargo pants, and black rubber boots, stands smiling in a vineyard. She has her hands in her pockets. The vineyard rows stretch into the distance, with a dirt path in the center. In the background, there are rolling hills and mountains under a cloudy sky.

WOMEN IN WINE

Andrea Yu discovers why the Oliver-Osoyoos wine region in British Columbia's Okanagan Valley is a forward-thinking locale for women in winemaking.

GETTING SAND IN my shoes isn't something I'm expecting when visiting a winery. But in the Okanagan Valley, home to Canada's only desert, summertime temperatures frequently enter into the 40s (degrees Celsius). Here, lanes of sand take the place of the dirt or grass I have come to expect from a grape-growing locale.

It turns out that grapes love sand, particularly for its high drainage. Coupled with a high fluctuation in temperatures, the cooling effects of the narrow Okanagan Lake that runs along the valley, and a variation in elevation offered by the towering Rocky and Cascade mountain regions, the conditions are ripe for growing delicious grapes for winemaking.

But it's not only the grapes that are flourishing in the Okanagan. As an up-and-coming wine region, akin to Ontario's Prince Edward County, the Okanagan isn't tied down by the traditional notions of winemaking where men were in charge and women were relegated to the tasting room. You'll find the best expression, so to speak, of women in winemaking in the most southerly end of the Okanagan. Here, the neighbouring young wine regions of Oliver and Osoyoos have set the stage for women to prosper, like winemaker Severine Pinte.

The French native honed her craft in Montpellier and Languedoc, where an old man's club of winemakers still prevails. "Production is very, very male-dominated," says Pinte of France's wine industry. "I had to work twice as hard to prove I could do the same thing." >

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LEFT: Winemaker
Melissa Smits moved
to B.C. after stints
working in Niagara,
New Zealand and
Australia



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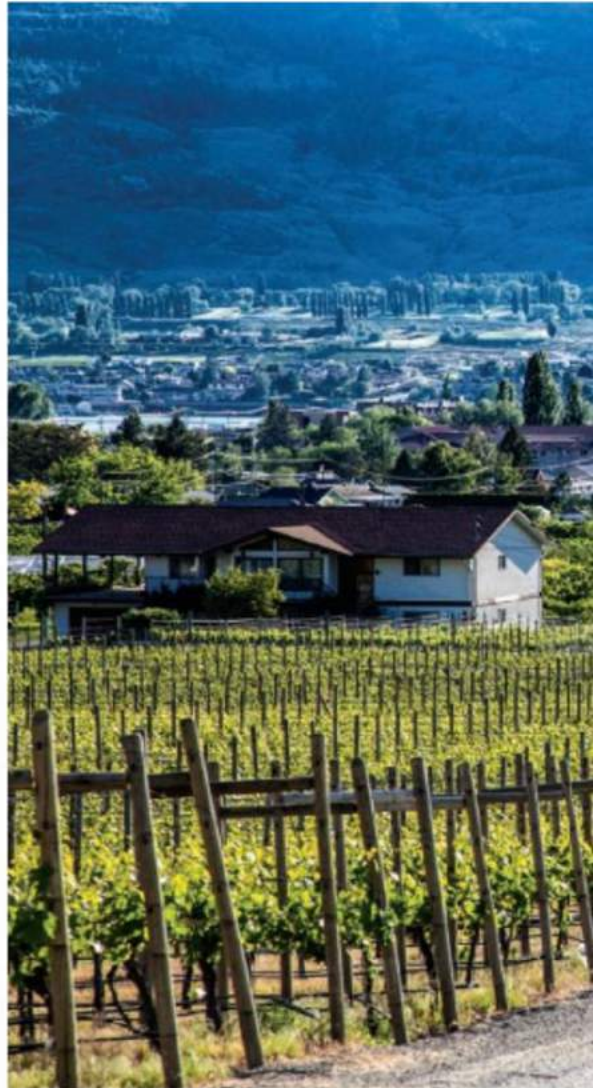
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PASQUA
A FAMILY PASSION

"THE OKANAGAN IS AN AMAZING, YOUNG WINE REGION. IT'S DYNAMIC"

► Pinte recalls a time earlier in her career in Languedoc, when she was working with a 75-year-old male winemaker. "He looked at me when I first arrived in the winery and he said, 'you know, when you have your period, you cannot come into the winery because the wines are going to turn.'"

Pinte didn't let the offhand comment phase her. Following her experience in France, she spent time in Western Australia before settling in the Okanagan Valley, where she now works as the head winemaker and viticulturist of sister wineries Le Vieux Pin and La Stella Winery. "The Okanagan is an amazing young wine region," says Pinte. "For me, the reason I stayed here is because it's

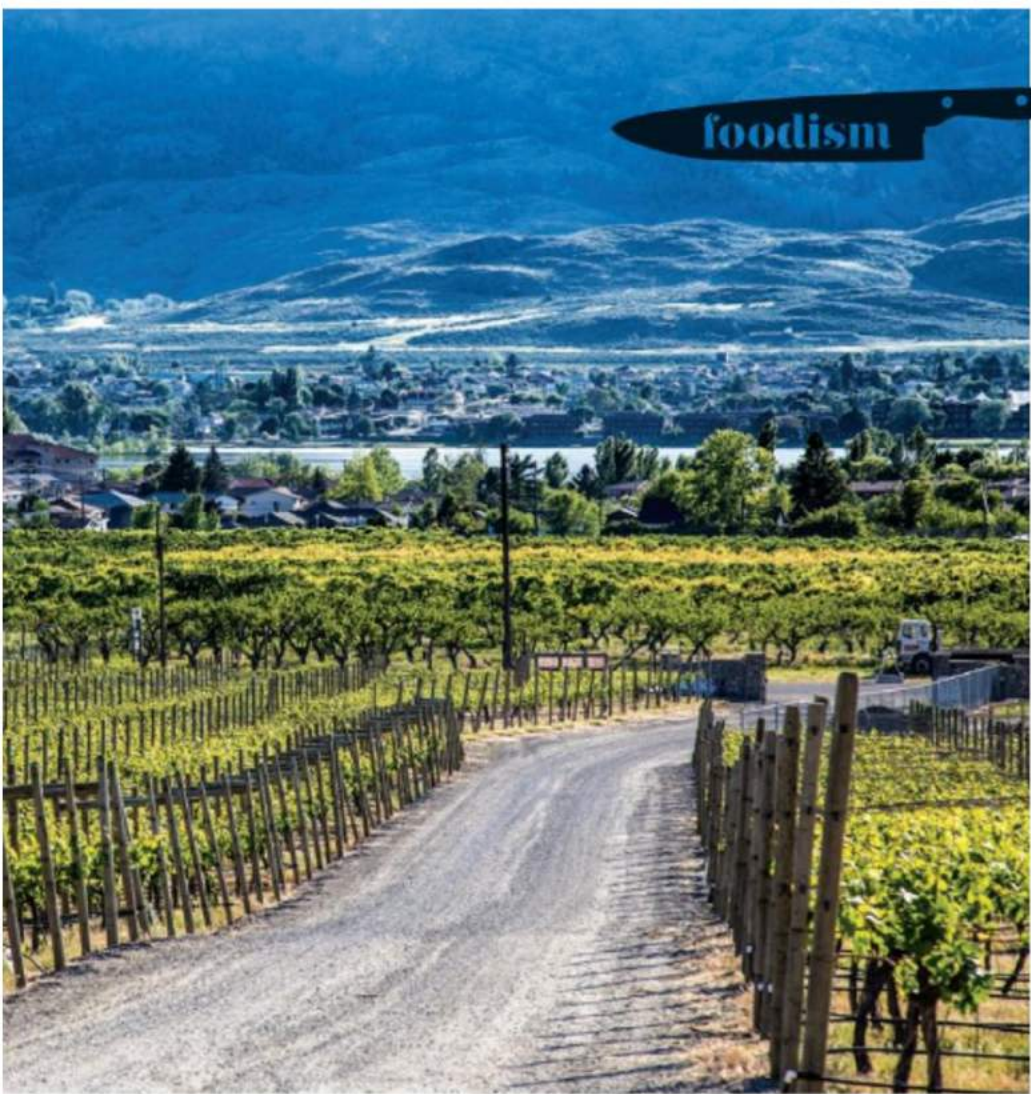


really dynamic."

Pinte says that Canada, in general, has made it easier for women in winemaking to climb up the ladder. Over the decade she has



ABOVE: The Okanagan wine region is located in Canada's only desert. Hot days and cool nights help grow excellent grapes for winemaking



spent at Le Vieux Pin and La Stella, Pinte has witnessed more and more women getting involved in the wine industry, and not just in the sales roles or tasting room where women have typically been employed. "When I put an ad in the paper for a cellar master, I had maybe 85 per cent of resumes from women," says Pinte. "That was a surprise."

Over at Oliver Twist Winery, owner Gina Harfman has found herself with an entirely female staff. "It wasn't by choice," she says. "I've just never really had a male apply here." Harfman rebranded Oliver Twist's bottles with nostalgic pinup designs when she took over ownership of the winery in 2012, which may have perpetuated Oliver Twist's image as being a woman-run winery. But the rebrand actually comes from Harfman's past life as a hot rod airbrushing designer and a retro pinup enthusiast.

Despite Oliver Twist's female-centric reputation within the industry, general manager Sheila Whittaker says that visitors still maintain traditional notions of what a winery owner looks like. "In our tasting room, a lot of visitors are very surprised that she's female, that she is a single mom, that she has kids," says Whittaker. "Most wineries, I guess, are owned either by families or someone

that's made a lot of money and has a hobby project in the Okanagan. Gina is quite unique in that way."

Harfman attests that everyone she's encountered in the industry was extremely supportive as she was taking over as owner of Oliver Twist Winery. Instead, as a mother of two children, her challenges come from balancing priorities between work and family. Her greatest test came when her second child came 15 weeks early, three years after Harfman became owner. "Vita, my daughter was born micro preemie," she ▶

OLIVER TWIST WINERY HAS AN ENTIRELY FEMALE STAFF



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PASQUA
A FAMILY PASSION



ABOVE: The Okanagan Valley is home to diverse wineries like Nk'Mip Cellars, North America's first Indigenous-owned winery

► recalls. "So I had to run off to the NICU unit – for about four months I was gone. That was a huge challenge."

Now, Harfman and Whittaker boast a flexible work environment for their female staff that puts family first. Harfman believes it's her staff's positive attitude that has created a welcoming environment for customers. "People come in and they just feel the warmth," she says. "Sometimes they leave with the staff hugging them."

There's a similar welcoming atmosphere among the Okanagan in general. At Intersection Estate Winery, a boutique operation in Oliver, the small environment means a full-time staff of just four get the opportunity to gain experience in multiple departments – pruning vines and stirring barrels alongside shifts in the tasting room.

Melissa Smits is Intersection's head winemaker and vineyard manager. The Grimsby, Ontario-born Smits got her start

SHE HAS THE CHANCE TO FLEX CREATIVE MUSCLE AND EXPLORE OFFBEAT WINES THAT TRADITIONAL WINERIES WOULDN'T PURSUE

in Niagara-on-the-Lake, studying at Niagara College and later working at Henry of Pelham. After spending time on harvests in New Zealand, Australia and Penticton, BC, Smits settled down in Oliver as Burrowing Owl's crew boss, in charge of an all-male, Spanish-speaking group of temporary foreign workers in the vineyards. "I was in the rows with the guys as much as possible," she explains. "I wasn't at a distance. Because if I demonstrated that I could work with them, then they would be very keen on working with me." Smits enjoyed the experience and says she never felt disrespected in her role.

After two years at Burrowing Owl, Smits transitioned into her current role at Intersection, where she has the opportunity to flex creative muscle and explore offbeat formulations that more established wineries might not pursue. Last year she was able to develop one of the region's first orange wines – an orange riesling that challenges the traditional notions (and palates) of wine with a tannic, dry and tart character akin to kombucha. Other wineries might not have let Smits take a chance on such an experimental offering, but her unusual orange riesling sold

out in just one summer – sooner than anyone had expected.

"With small, boutique wineries, you aren't pushed to make things for the LCBO in large batches, so there really isn't that kind of pressure here," Smits explains. "You can explore the creative side of winemaking and the small tonnages."

Smits' experience in the Okanagan, and that of many of the women here, is that the industry has been so supportive and welcoming that they don't even think about how or whether their gender holds them back. It's a non-issue, it seems, and if anything, women are a driving force of change in the industry.

Smits points to Lynn Bremmer, British Columbia's first winemaker, whose background in analysis has helped her establish a lab certification to help winery labs keep their equipment calibrated correctly. Sandra Oldfield, former CEO of Tinhorn Creek, has been instrumental in promoting B.C. wines to the world – establishing the wine region's sub-appellations and sub-geographic indicators to gain better recognition among international and out-of-province markets. Severine Pinte, of La Stella and Le Vieux Pin, is helping to establish a certification program for the sustainability practices of wineries.

The welcoming atmosphere here has been fruitful for not only women but other diverse groups that may have otherwise had difficulty establishing themselves in a predominantly white industry. Of note are Nk'Mip Cellars, North America's first Indigenous-owned winery, which was named second-best winery in British Columbia by WineAlign in 2018. Many of the winery workers are members of the Osoyoos Indian Reserve, including winemaker Justin Hall.

Head 20 minutes north of Nk'Mip and you'll reach Kismet Estate Winery, run by brothers Sukhi and Balwinder Dhaliwal. The pair immigrated to Oliver from India's Punjab state and found work picking fruit. They soon rose up the ranks to become managers and orchard-owners themselves while the region was gaining more and more notoriety for its grape-growing conditions. After discovering that the grapes they had grown and sold to other wineries were earning top industry awards, they decided to enter the winemaking world themselves and opened Kismet Estate Winery in 2013.

Sampling Kismet's portfolio of wines in their tasting room with Neelam Dhaliwal, daughter of Sukhi and Kismet's operations

IF ANYTHING, WOMEN ARE A DRIVING FORCE OF CHANGE IN THE OKANAGAN'S WINE INDUSTRY

manager, gives me an understanding of why their grapes have coveted so many accolades. Of note are their rosés which are among the best I've tasted during my time in British Columbia. Neelam admits that the rosé style has been more challenging for the winery to master, but they finally nailed down a magical blend for their 2017 Infinity Rosé.

Following our sampling, we migrate from the tasting room to Masala Bistro, Kismet's restaurant, and tuck into a spread of Indian curries, chapatis and tandoori eats. Feasting on Indian food is another activity I wasn't expecting to happen in the Okanagan, but I'm not complaining. **f**

BELOW: Winemaker Severine Pinte studied in France but excelled in her craft after arriving in the Okanagan Valley

